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Eastern Orthodoxy and Lutheranism

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Eastern Orthodoxy

The Reformation was an event within the Western church. Yet it claimed that its theological insights were not a regional or confessional matter: since they brought to light the gospel, these understandings were relevant to the whole of Christendom since the gospel itself is universally valid. And indeed the Reformers, especially those in Wittenberg, were well aware that Christendom was not limited to the western half of Europe, but also had taken root in the eastern part, and even beyond the continent. What they had in mind was first of all the Greek church. Humanism had focused attention not only on the Greek classics but also on the Greek church fathers and their later heirs. Among adherents of the Reformation, who themselves had to fear suppression of their faith, the Ottoman invasion of Christian lands created a sense of solidarity with its Orthodox victims. Yet most of all the Greek church—and to a limited extent also the other Eastern churches—played an important role in the Reformers' altercation with the Roman Catholic Church. The existence of the Eastern churches was living proof that the Roman church was only an *ecclesia particularis* (particular church), not the *tota ecclesia Christi* (the whole church of Christ), and that the church catholic transcended the church of the pope. For that reason alone specific traits of the Roman church like papacy, celibacy, private Mass, expiatory sacrifice, Communion for the laity in one kind (bread), and indulgences could not be considered essential for salvation. The Reformers rather invoked the Greek church—not always correctly—in favor of changes in church life and doctrine they introduced.

This positive attitude toward the Greek church did not mean that its doctrine and institutions were considered normative. Luther, as well as Melanchthon, could also criticize it harshly. As for every ecclesial tradition, so that of the Greeks was considered testimony to and expression of the gospel, and thus it could claim authority only as far as it was in agreement with the Word of God. Where such agreement was lacking, a tradition had to be criticized and rejected, even if it was the outcome of an ecumenical council. According to the Reformers, in the Roman church the true church was only held in captivity and had not ceased to exist because Christ had always raised and preserved true believers in spite of its many non-Christian doctrines, institutions, and representatives; so also the Reformers' awareness of the bonds with the Greek church was based less on supposedly similar phenomena than on the axiomatic conviction that Christ would prevail in the whole of Christendom. However, at least Philip Melanchthon, who was particularly interested in visible continuity as a testimony to the continuous effectiveness of the gospel, always considered the Reformation to be close to the Greek church, especially the ancient Greek church.

Beyond this theoretical relationship with the Greek church, Melanchthon had a few contacts with living Greeks of his time. Among them was the Moldavian fugitive Jakobos Basilikos Herakleides, who in the late 1550s spent some time in Wittenberg. Jakobos was won over for the Reformation, and when he gained power in his home territory a few years later, he tried to reshape the Moldavian church accordingly (1561), albeit with little success. Another Eastern Orthodox theologian who appeared in Wittenberg in those years was the Serbian deacon Demetrios Mysos (1559).

Presumably he had been sent by the ecumenical patriarch in order to gather information about the Reformation. Melanchthon used Mysos's presence to gain knowledge in turn about the Greek church. At Mysos's departure Melanchthon gave him a letter for the patriarch, to which was appended the *Confessio Augustana Graeca*, a Greek translation of the Augsburg Confession drawn up a few years earlier by a Lutheran schoolteacher as a didactical enterprise; Melanchthon revised it slightly in order to make technical terms of Western theology (e.g., *satisfactio*, *justificatio*, *meritum*) more understandable for Greek readers. In his letter to the patriarch he described the eschatological plight that afflicted the adherents of the Reformation as well as the Eastern Orthodox and expressed his hope that God would rally "the holy assemblies [*ekklēsiai* in the sense of congregations] all over the world." The patriarch was asked not to give credence to slanders that he might have heard about the Reformation, but rather to believe in the reports Mysos would bring him, that in Wittenberg the Holy Scripture, the dogmatic decisions of the ancient synods, as well as the doctrines of many church fathers were diligently upheld and heresies rejected. The *Confessio Augustana Graeca* was meant as a proof to these claims. As it seems, the package never reached Constantinople. At least there was never a reaction to it.

Melanchthon's former student David Chytraeus (1530–1600) shared his teacher's interest in the Greek church, and gathered information about it on a large scale. His *Über den heutigen Zustand der Kirchen in Griechenland, Asien, Afrika, Ungarn, Böhmen, etc.* (*On the present state of the churches in Greece, Asia, Africa, Hungary, Bohemia, etc.*), which first appeared in 1569 and was republished many times, presented the public with a rather detailed picture of the Eastern churches, their doctrines, and their practices. Chytraeus's interest, like Melanchthon's earlier, was driven by motives of humanistic learning as well as of theology. He belonged to a second generation of reformers.

Thus he possessed a clear confessional identity over against other confessional churches, including the Greek. On the other hand, this second generation of Lutherans still presupposed that there were basic common convictions, especially with the Greek tradition. So the "Catalogue of Testimonies" that accompanied many editions of the Book of Concord, which was the work of that generation, quoted a host of Greek theologians from the church fathers down to the fourteenth century.

On the Greek side the perspective was less positive. There was little knowledge about the Reformation, and if there was some, it was negative. Rumors had presented the religious changes and altercations in Germany, Switzerland, France, and other lands as yet another deterioration within the Latin church, a new stage of the mania for innovation (*neōterismos*), of which the West was accused anyway. Since most information came across the Venetian Aegean Sea, often the polemics of the Counter-Reformation presented an additional negative lens. Occasional writings by Greek authors (Nikandros Nukios, Pachomios Rhusanos) took up the subject. Their general image of the Reformation portrayed a movement that rejected images, monasteries, and the invocation of saints; despised traditions of the church and changed the liturgy; used *azyma* (unleavened bread) in the Eucharist; upheld the addition of the *Filioque* term to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father "and the Son"), perhaps even questioned the Trinity; and simply led to atheism. This depiction indicated no awareness of the differences between the Lutheran and the Reformed strands of the Reformation. The antitrinitarian movement, which had one of its strongholds in the Balkans, further darkened the picture.

Thus each side had a quite different basis for the first theological exchange between representatives of the Lutheran and the Greek churches, which began in 1573. The reason why this exchange came about and grew into a serious correspondence over several years was

the presence of a Lutheran theologian, Stephan Gerlach, in Constantinople. He succeeded in creating an atmosphere of trust. Gerlach, the chaplain of the ambassador of the Holy Roman Empire in Constantinople, had been a student of the leading Lutheran theological faculty of the time, Tübingen. His former professors seized the opportunity to enter into contact with Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremias II (1536–95). The driving force behind this move was the foremost Grecist of his time, Martin Crusius (1526–1607), who became the father of neo-Hellenic studies. He convinced the theologian Jakob Andreae, one of the authors of the Formula of Concord and a leading figure not only of the church of Württemberg but also of Lutheranism as a whole, to join him, and both wrote to Jeremias. Crusius, who presented himself as a “lover of all things Greek” (*philhellēn*), hoped to gain knowledge about the Greeks of his time; Andreae supported his efforts. For the decisive step, taken in the following year, Andreae played the crucial role. In 1574 the *Confessio Augustana Graeca* was again sent to Constantinople. This time it did arrive and triggered an ecumenical dialogue in written form, which also involved other prominent Lutheran theologians of the time (e.g., Jakob Heerbrand) and lasted until 1581, when Jeremias broke it off. The following six topics were discussed: the procession of the Holy Spirit (*Filioque*); free will, faith, grace, and good works; saints and icons; monasticism; sacraments; and tradition. One basic difference finally made Patriarch Jeremias conclude that the dialogue led nowhere: different theological methods and their ecclesiological implications. The patriarch simply offered long quotations from the church fathers and other texts of tradition. The Lutheran theologians presented systematic arguments developed on the basis of Holy Scripture.

The correspondence between Tübingen and Constantinople was the first and only theological exchange between Lutherans and Eastern Orthodox on a larger scale for centuries. Crusius tried to launch similar contacts

with the Ethiopian church, but failed. In Russia, Czar Ivan IV held a public debate with a Lutheran theologian, yet without positive results, as was to be expected (1570). Only in Romania did the proximity of the Romanian Orthodox and the Siebenburgian Lutheran churches allow regular communication. The first book printed in Romanian was a translation of Luther’s Small Catechism, followed by translations of biblical books on the basis of Protestant translations in other languages; the Small Catechism was widely used by Romanian Orthodox theologians. In the eyes of those Orthodox hierarchs, however, the Lutherans remained Western heretics.

After the end of the exchange between Tübingen and Constantinople, the Calvinist churches were more engaged with the Greek Orthodox, who became an object for missionary competition with the Roman church. The effect was a general rejection of all Western churches from the Orthodox side in the seventeenth century. Jeremias II’s answers to the Lutherans gained semiofficial status as a pan-Orthodox rejection of Lutheranism. Yet below the official level there continued to be a trickle of mutual interest and contact between Lutheranism and Eastern Orthodoxy, at least with Russian Orthodox Christians. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz asked Czar Peter the Great to call a general council for a union of all Christian Churches (1712–13), and Nikolaus von Zinzendorf tried to build closer ties with the Eastern Orthodox Church (1739–40). The Lutheran Pietist August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) founded a *Collegium Orientale* for Eastern Orthodox students and a printing office for Russian publications in his school complex in Halle. He also sent missionaries to Turkey and Russia. They met with little success, but Russian translations of Lutheran books printed in Halle were widely read in Russia; devotional works were used even in monasteries (e.g., Johann Gerhard’s *Meditationes* and Johann Arndt’s *True Christianity*); and theological intellectuals consulted more systematic works, in Russian or in the Latin

original (e.g., Johann Gerhard's *Loci theologici*). Some even incorporated elements from these books into their own theological works (Feofan Prokopovicz/Prokopovich).

Another theological exchange between representatives of Lutheran and Eastern Orthodox churches, however, did not take place until the second half of the twentieth century. Prepared by the participation of both confessional families in the multilateral ecumenical institutions initiated in the first half of that century (Commissions of Faith and Order and Life and Work, World Council of Churches), individual Lutheran and Eastern Orthodox churches began dialogues (Germany, Finland, United States). Finally the Lutheran World Federation and the Pan-Orthodox Conference followed suit (1981). The themes at the center of these dialogues are still the same as those discussed between Tübingen and Constantinople four centuries earlier.

See also Chytraeus, David; Ecumenical Dialogues; Finnish Interpretation of Luther; Melanchthon, Philip; Russia

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